

Students Across the World Are Protesting on Friday. Why?

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Highlight: One Swedish teenager's protest has gone global, with students around the world planning to skip class on Friday to demand action on climate change.

Body

What began as one student's vigil calling for action on climate change has gone global, with school strikes planned in more than 100 countries on Friday. Here is a look at how the climate protests spread and how political leaders are responding.

A lonely start to an international movement

When a Swedish teenager, Greta Thunberg, sat before her country's Parliament in August, she was a solitary protester, armed with fliers that said she was refusing to attend school to protest adults' lack of concern for her future.

She sought to draw attention to the perilous state of the climate: Data from NASA has shown the past five years to be the warmest on record, and a report last year by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warned that without aggressive action, the world will face worsening wildfires, food shortages and other catastrophic effects as early as 2040.

Ms. Thunberg's protest quickly drew notice, with others joining in. After the Swedish elections in September, she made her strike a weekly event most Fridays. Then it began to spread, both online under the hashtags #climatestrike and #FridaysForFuture and on the streets.

In Australia, students from more than 200 schools skipped class on Nov. 30 to protest their country's climate policies and call for a ban on any new coal or gas projects.

A shy teenager becomes a leader

Ms. Thunberg, 16, is in some ways an unlikely figurehead for a worldwide movement.

An introvert prone to crippling depression who did not like to speak in class, she was powerfully shaken by lessons about pollution, species extinction and humans' influence on climate.

As her protest drew attention, she attended a United Nations climate conference in December in Poland, where she criticized negotiators. "You are not mature enough to tell it like it is," she said. "Even that burden you leave to us children."

In January, she traveled by train to attend the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, where she told a group of elites that many of them had made "unimaginable amounts of money" at the expense of the planet's future.

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A Norwegian lawmaker said on Thursday that he and two colleagues had nominated Ms. Thunberg for the Nobel Peace Prize. She said she was “ honored and very grateful.”

Now the face of a global movement, Ms. Thunberg says her work has given her a welcome sense of purpose.

“I’m happier now,” she told The New York Times last month. “I have meaning. I have something I have to do.”

A critical response from some leaders

Some school officials and politicians have criticized the protests, calling them a naïve misuse of class time.

Ms. Thunberg has responded sharply.

When Theresa May, Britain’s prime minister, called the walkouts a waste of lesson time last month, Ms. Thunberg tweeted: “That may well be the case. But then again, political leaders have wasted 30 yrs of inaction. And that is slightly worse.”

More than 1,600 events planned worldwide

Last year, Ms. Thunberg called on the Swedish government to adopt policies in line with the Paris climate agreement, which sets a goal of limiting the global temperature rise from preindustrial levels to well below 2 degrees Celsius.

Students from other schools followed, and Friday’s protests could be the largest yet. By early Thursday, more than 1,600 events were scheduled in at least 105 countries, according to organizers.

“Tomorrow we schoolstrike for our future,” Ms. Thunberg tweeted. “And we will continue to do so for as long as it takes.”

Iliana Magra contributed reporting.

PHOTO: Greta Thunberg, who began a global youth movement calling for action on climate change, after a protest in Stockholm last month. (PHOTOGRAPH BY Elisabeth Ubbe for The New York Times FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

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